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Writing to a Grand Vezir: Azmizade Efendi's Letters to Nasuh Paşa, 1611-1614

Christine WOODHEAD*

Abstract: Ottoman *münşe'at* collections from the early seventeenth century often contain letters sent to vezirs, as well as those to professional colleagues and to personal friends. This essay is a brief study of six letters sent by Azmizade Efendi to the grand vezir Nasuh Paşa, as a contribution to the understanding of patron-client links between high-level *ümera* and *ulema*. It also suggests the notion of a 'language of fidelity' as a starting point for appreciating the style of such letters.

Keywords: Letter collections, patronage, use of language.

Introduction

'The fragrant bouquet of service is bound together with the thread of sincerity and has been placed by a prayerful hand before your glorious presence.'¹ This phrase, and many more in similar vein, constitute the principal content of letters written by a leading Ottoman *kadı* to an incumbent grand vezir in the early seventeenth century. What was the significance of such writing at the time, and how should we interpret it today? In a prosopographical study of social mobility among the Ottoman *ulema* in the reign of Murad III, Suraiya Faroqhi emphasized the fact that in the late sixteenth century, in addition to the expected patronage by senior *ulema* of their junior professional colleagues, there were clearly also close links between senior *ümera* officials and leading *ulema*. In this relationship, vezirs were the givers, while *kadıs* and *kazaskers* were the receivers of patronage.² What exactly this kind of patron-client relationship entailed, and how it functioned can be explored in several ways and across different time periods. This present essay offers a contribution to such studies through the example of a single patronage relationship, that of Azmizade Mustafa Halefi Efendi (d. 1631) and Ahmed I's grand vezir Nasuh Paşa (d. 1614). In doing so primarily through Azmizade's letters to Nasuh Paşa, it examines both the context of writing and the 'language

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¹ Azmizade Efendi, *Münşe'at*, British Library ms. OR. 1169, f. 41a, lines 5-7: Güldeste-i fâ'ihü'l-vürüd-ı bendegî ser-rişte-i ihlâsa mecmû' ve dest-i du'â-peyvest ile pişgâh-ı câh-u-celâllerine mevzû' kılındığı arz olındukdan sonra ...

² Suraiya Faroqhi, 'Social mobility among the Ottoman 'ulema in the late sixteenth century', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 4 (1973), 209. For more recent research on patron-client relations affecting the judicial profession in the mid/late 17th century, see Denise Klein, *Die osmanischen Ulema des 17. Jahrhunderts: eine geschlossene Gesellschaft?* (Berlin 2007), esp. pp. 105-130.

of fidelity'³ exemplified above, as used by Azmizade. This research is also part of a larger, long-term study of early seventeenth-century Ottoman *münşe'at* collections, which will assess the context of production and use of language by a number of literary correspondents.

Azmizade (1570-1631) came from a relatively privileged social and educational background. The son of Murad III's *hoca*, the poet Azmi Efendi, and a student of Hoca Sadeddin, from whom he gained his *mülazemet*, he enjoyed a successful early career as a *müderres* in Istanbul colleges and in January 1603 received his first judicial post as *kadı* of Damascus. In mid-career, while subject to regular periods out of office as were all senior *kadıs*, Azmizade appears to have met with at least three unusual reverses of fortune. On appointment to Cairo in 1604 he was unexpectedly required to stand in for the governor Hacı İbrahim Paşa when the latter was killed in a military revolt and was soon dismissed for (according to Ata'i) failing in his duty. His next appointment c. 1607 as *kadı* of Bursa was blighted by the *celali* siege of that city. In October 1611 he was transferred in disgrace from a recent posting to Edirne back to the judgeship of Damascus due to controversy aroused by his disciplining of a local *kadı*. Thereafter, however, his career was less troubled, though with long periods out of office. It culminated in 1627-29 with an eighteen-month tenure of the post of *kazasker* of Rumeli.⁴

The Patronage Context

To what extent high-ranking judges had always been in some ways beholden to vezirs for career advancement as they were to senior members of their own profession is an open question. The turn of the seventeenth century is potentially a very revealing period in which to study the working of such patronage links, and the nature of the political relationships between vezirs and judges at the highest levels. That the *şeyhülislam* should be a major political actor was recognized and encouraged by the formal emergence of that post during the sixteenth century and by Ebussuud's long, influential tenure of it. The brief appointment of such a controversial figure as Hoca Sadeddin Efendi (1598-99) and the almost complete dominance of the *şeyhülislamlık* by his sons Mehmed and Es'ad from 1608 to 1625 brought the office further into political prominence, and into both positive and antagonistic relations with vezirs. Mehmet İpşirli's study of Sun'ullah Efendi's four short periods in office between 1599 and 1608 demonstrates clearly the open enmity which could arise

³ A term discussed in Arthur L. Herman, 'The language of fidelity in early modern France', *Journal of Modern History*, 67/1 (1995), pp. 1-24, to be discussed further below.

⁴ Cf. Haluk İpekten, 'Azmizâde Mustafa Halefî', *DİA*, IV, İstanbul 1991, pp. 348-349. Ata'i, who was a pupil of Azmizade, gives the fullest contemporary account: *Zeyl-i Şeka'ik-i nu'maniye* (İstanbul 1268), pp. 739-741.

between a grand vezir and *şeyhülislam* as the sultan's two chief advisors each worked to undermine the stability of the other.⁵ In such a context, it is perhaps unsurprising that ambitious senior judges such as Azmizade were prepared to seek the patronage and assistance – rather than risk the enmity – of a powerful, if philistine and ruthless, grand vezir such as Nasuh Paşa.⁶

Wealthy and influential vezirs were also regularly sought as literary patrons by poets and writers generally. Azmizade, under the mahlas Haleti, became one of the major poets of the period and made good use of this means of keeping his name prominent. His *divan* contains many *kasides* and other types of verse presented to sultans from Mehmed III to Murad IV, to several vezirs of the same period (including two to Nasuh Paşa), to certain *şeyhülislams* and to other influential individuals such as *kapu ağası* Gazanfer Ağa.⁷ Being accustomed to presenting such verse to *ümera* officials was probably another factor which encouraged Azmizade to address letters to them as well. His *münşe'at* contains at least twelve letters to vezirs, in contrast to the collection of letters by his fellow *kadı* and *münşi* Abdülkerim Efendi, who was not a well-known poet, which contains only three.⁸

The six letters by Azmizade to Nasuh Paşa studied here can all be dated to the three years of the latter's grand vezirate, from August 1611 to October 1614. Despite Azmizade's constant protestations of long-serving loyalty to Nasuh Paşa, there is no clear evidence of any earlier attempt by him to obtain Nasuh Paşa's favour.⁹ However, what is clear from two other letters written from Edirne in October 1611 to Abdülkerim Efendi is that Azmizade was extremely distressed by 'the episode of that contemptible *kadı*' and by the thought that people were laughing at him behind his back. It 'has given my colleagues several days amusement; the learned scholars of Rumeli have been gossiping about it endlessly'.¹⁰ His intensive appeals to the grand vezir can therefore be read as attempts to recover his personal and professional standing in what for him were humiliating circumstances. The letters give little clear indication of whether or how Nasuh Paşa did use his influence on Azmizade's behalf, either in the transfer to Damascus in October

⁵ Mehmet İpşirli, 'Şeyhülislam Sun'ullah Efendi', *Türk Edebiyatı Dergisi*, 13 (1983-1987), pp. 209-256; and also the longer-term view in his essay 'Osmanlı ilmiye mesleği hakkında gözlemler (XVI-XVII. asırlarda)', *Osmanlı Araştırmaları*, VII-VIII (1988), pp. 273-285.

⁶ Ömer İşbilir, 'Nasuh Paşa', *DİA*, XXXII, İstanbul 2006, p. 428 reporting the general contemporary view of Nasuh Paşa as 'son derece mağrur, zalim, gaddar, kindar ve servet düşküni'.

⁷ Bayram Ali Kaya (ed.), *The divân of 'Azmi-zâde Haleti* (Sources of Oriental language and literatures 57 and 58, Harvard University 2003), 2 v.

⁸ British Library OR. 1139.

⁹ However, Azmizade's *münşe'at* is unpublished and the manuscript used here, British Library OR. 1169, contains only 52 letters. Longer versions exist, with up to 85 letters, including 9 to Nasuh Paşa: see Kaya (ed.), *Divân of 'Azmi-zâde Haleti*, v. 58: 'Introduction and facsimile edition', pp. 28-29 for a listing of recipients.

¹⁰ OR. 1169, ff. 39a-b.

1611 or in his appointment as *kadı* of Istanbul in August 1614. However, the fact that Azmizade was dismissed from the judgeship of Istanbul just two months later, in October 1614, shortly after the execution of Nasuh Paşa could suggest that he was regarded as one of the pasha's supporters and clients.

The Letters

The majority of letters in the *münşe'at* of Azmizade are to three types of recipient: to vezirs and other military-administrative officials (c. 25%), to senior *ulema* colleagues (c. 50%), and to historically less well-known acquaintances in various ranks and professions (c. 25%).¹¹ Many in the second and third categories may probably be counted as Azmizade's personal friends as well as his professional contacts. In the collection used for this study, the six letters to Nasuh Paşa are the largest number to any one individual, whether *ulema* or *ümera*. Hafiz Ahmed Paşa, also a poet and governor of Damascus during Azmizade's second tenure there, appears to have been the next most regular *ümera* recipient of his letters.¹²

Letter 1, the longest of the six letters, was sent from Edirne to Nasuh Paşa in Diyarbekir to congratulate him on his appointment as grand vezir.¹³ Like virtually all letters in *münşe'at* collections it is undated, but was probably written in early September 1611, shortly after Nasuh Paşa's appointment in August. In the first half of the letter, Azmizade declares his surprise and delight at the news, with an initial astrological metaphor.

The heavenly stars which portend misfortune were totally incapacitated by this auspicious conjunction; Leo's fierce lion was compelled to find company with Capricorn's kid and the lamb of Aries. The glow of the world-dominating moon rendered helpless the eyes of the enemies of religion; the long shadow of the prosperity-bestowing royal decree plunged into darkness the minds of the enemies of state.¹⁴

He apologises for the delay in writing, putting this down to 'the knot of uncertainty [which] remained in the thread of my affairs', which probably refers to the episode of the 'contemptible *kadı*'. He looks forward to a time when 'my eyelashes might sweep the dust of your threshold and [when] I may dance with joy in anticipation of your service'. This leads into the second half of the letter, in which Azmizade pleads his own case.

If you consider for how long I have bound myself in service to you and have fastened the collar of sincerity around my heart, may it not be thought necessary to place the curtain of negligence at your noble door of kindness, and may the honest breast of your friend not be thought worthy

¹¹ Comparison of the British Library manuscript with the list given by Kaya suggests that the percentages of correspondents are similar in both shorter and longer collections.

¹² Two in OR. 1169; seven in Kaya's list.

¹³ OR. 1169, ff. 36a-37b.

¹⁴ The Ottoman original of the extracts presented here is not given for reasons of space and due to the fact that a full edition of the letters is in preparation.

of blows. ... My inner world has been compressed by the arrival of an army of woes, and the fleet horse of my hopes has been lamed by the distribution of undesirable stones. There is no doubt that the abundance of knots of anxiety has shortened the thread of my endurance and the appearance of lightning flashes of calamity has ruined the harvest of my hopes. For some time I have struggled with daily afflictions and seen smiles of joy on the lips of my enemies.

The substance of the letter ends with a plea that 'the garden of the desert of my hopes should not remain without fruit'.

Letter 2¹⁵ is also addressed to Nasuh Paşa in Diyarbekir although it may not have reached him there and it is possible that the letter-heading (which was written later) is in error. Azmizade states towards the end of this letter that he had travelled to Haleb (presumably from Damascus) – 'stopping and starting, stumbling along' – arriving at the beginning of Rebiülevvel [1021], i.e. early May 1612, with the intention of meeting the grand vezir in that city. Other sources indicate that, after spending the winter of 1611-12 in Diyarbekir, Nasuh Paşa had left for Haleb in early spring and spent several months there before continuing his progress to Istanbul, where he arrived in early September.¹⁶ This letter is very clearly a request for an audience.

It is my furthest hope that I might be able to attract your noble glance by wiping my face at your horse's hoof and by casting the longing gaze of my poor eyes towards the dust of the feet of your mounts. I hope that this will be kindly granted.

Letter 3 was sent from Damascus to congratulate the grand vezir on achieving *damad* status through his marriage to a daughter of Ahmed I.¹⁷ The wedding took place in December 1612. The letter is again in two very different parts. The congratulatory first part contains the expected cries of joy.

Ever since fate's gardener began arranging the flowers of existence, or the bride's maid of providence toyed with the pots of creation's perfume, no such desired image has ever been known to exist... How excellent will be this joyful wedding feast, in which small round plates brimful of dirhems sparkling like stars will be scattered far and wide by the hand of the sun.

The longer second part of the letter again pleads Azmizade's case.

On account of my contrary fortune, your humble servant ... has not enjoyed the eternal honour of your exalted salon ... The meadow of my hopes, which was previously flourishing, is now on the point of withering away, and the star of my fortune is about to set. The harsh, heavy rain of unkindness has spoiled the seed of my hopes. Storms of disappointment of Doomsday proportions have levelled the mountain of my strength.¹⁸ ...

¹⁵ OR. 1169, ff. 40a-41b.

¹⁶ Cf. *Topçular Kâtibi 'Abdülkâdir (Kadrî) Efendi Tarihi*, ed. Ziya Yılmaz, I, Ankara 2003, pp. 600-604.

¹⁷ OR. 1169, ff. 48a-49a.

¹⁸ This may refer to some new disappointment or, more likely, to Azmizade's general perception of mid-career difficulties expressed in the available rhetoric of oppression.

Now, when your cup of ambition is overflowing and the banks of the stream of your beneficence are lush green meadows, may you incline towards gilding the pages of my existence with the rays of light from your compassionate eye, and may you turn your gracious, world-seeing gaze to convey news of your bounty. Whatever may arise from the depths of your liberal heart will be of pure benefit to me.

Letter 4, written 'while on the point of departure for the capital, having just received news of dismissal from the judgeship of Damascus' can be dated to mid/late July 1613.¹⁹ As Azmizade probably faced a long period out of office, this letter makes no pretense at being anything other than a plea for assistance, though he casts his dismissal as a welcome opportunity to return to Istanbul and be near his patron.

These feeble tokens of service, presented as a rare gift to your inner sanctum of power, are worthy only of being doormats in the audience chamber of your generosity. I, this worthless speck of dust, am the envy of the sun through the outpouring of the brilliant light rays of your favour. ... I have always added to the office of my prayers the role of sweeper of that refuge of men, your threshold, and have long considered the brightness emanating from your stirrup equal to that of the rays of the sun's all-seeing eye. ... With the sending in the last days of Cemaziyülevvel [1022: July 1613] of the good news which means my return to your service, I donned the garb of a pilgrim and departed for your welcoming *ka'be*, clapping my hands, tapping my feet, and rejoicing in the joyful refrain 'no harm comes to a house which is destroyed by its architect'.

Letter 5²⁰ is a relatively brief communication full of regret that due to illness Azmizade is unable to attend upon the grand vezir in person. It was sent to Nasuh Paşa in Edirne and was probably written some time between November 1613 and February 1614 when Ahmed I and his grand vezir were there for the winter and Azmizade remained in Istanbul, biding his time while out of office. The letter suggests that Azmizade's illness is caused, at least partly, by depression, which could easily be lifted by his patron's attention.

I am at present afflicted by a quartan fever, which frustrates my desire to attend upon you. ... [However,] as the learned physicians are agreed that the best remedy for the aforesaid affliction would be ease of mind and raising of the spirits, I remain hopeful that this medicine will manifest itself from the hospital of your compassion, and that it will be the means of restoring my good health.

This letter is accompanied, and its message reinforced, by another to the grand vezir's *tezkireci* in Edirne, Şem'i Çelebi, again explaining his absence due to illness and the opportunity missed.²¹

Delirium and sickness are once more the lot of my miserable self
The candle of my soul is again blown out due to this affliction

¹⁹ OR. 1169, ff. 51b-53a.

²⁰ OR. 1169, ff. 53a-54a.

²¹ OR. 1169, ff. 54a-55a.

Letter 6, entitled 'reply to an *'iyadetname* from the grand vezir' is the only one which clearly indicates a response by Nasuh Paşa to Azmizade's petitions.²² The *'iyadetname* may have been prompted, and was no doubt written, by Şem'i Çelebi.

[Your letter] has increased my inner drive and consoled my miserable soul. It has polished the perceptive eye and bestowed kindness on a mind worn down by troubles. It has smoothed away my frowns and re-ordered my dishevelled turban.

That the letter was sent to Nasuh Paşa in Edirne again suggests that it was written in the winter of 1613-14. Azmizade eventually received a new appointment, as *kadı* of Istanbul, in August 1614.

The 'Language of Fidelity'

Each letter begins and ends with fulsome prayers for the grand vezir's health and prosperity. As suggested by the extracts given above, the body of the each text proceeds through constant juxtaposition of metaphorical extremes of fortune, riches and power on the part of the vezir, and of distress and destitution on the part of the writer. There is little specific content or hard 'fact' in any letter. In contrast to Nasuh Paşa's sun-like radiance, his all-seeing eye of power and comprehension, the flurry of competent action indicated by the clouds of dust raised by his horses' hooves, and his potential to bestow great reward through the slightest generosity, Azmizade depicts himself as the lowest of the low. He is a weak little wren at the mercy of the eagle of death, or a beggar at the banqueting table who receives fewer scraps than the dogs. He is constantly thirsty in the desert, worn out by cares and woes. His only happiness comes when he hears good news of his patron, to whose service he has long been devoted.

Such positive and negative images are part and parcel of letters of fidelity in many pre-modern, literate societies. Azmizade was following models of both form and imagery well-established in Ottoman and Islamic culture, though in Ata'i's view he did so with unrivalled 'perfection of beauty' and rarity of expression. To a modern eye such letters seem obsequious to the point of embarrassment, and the constant professions of sincerity appear profoundly *insincere*. Yet, as with all types of letters in *münşe'at* collections, it can be more helpful to consider first the reason for writing and the function served by the letter, and only secondly to assess its style.

This approach has similarities with recent debate on the use of the 'self-consciously artificial rhetoric' of 'fidelity, devotion and service' in seventeenth-century French letter-writing.²³ How sincere were writers in

²² OR. 1169, ff. 57b-58b.

²³ Herman, 'The language of fidelity', p. 2.

such protestations of loyalty, or were they simply using an accepted form or code of address while they themselves did not believe a word of what they actually wrote? How, in return, did the recipient, the hoped-for patron, understand these sentiments of dependency and self-sacrifice? Arthur Herman's solution in the case of such French letter-writing is to regard it 'not as language *about* fidelity, but as a language game, the language *of* fidelity'. In other words, it was not the content of what was said which mattered, but the simple fact that it was said at all and that letters were exchanged between individuals to establish a reciprocal arrangement between the two. Such patron-client relations operated by creating a 'moral justification' of gratitude for services to be provided or benefits to be given. Ingratitude, by either party, 'was the worst of all social and political crimes'.²⁴ Hence profession of loyalty and devotion was part of the language game, as a declaration of intent in public life rather than of true personal feeling. It could last only as long as benefits were provided; as in a business deal, if the supply of goods failed, either party was entitled to look elsewhere. Neither lost face in doing so.

On the other hand, while neither patron nor client needed to believe what was actually said, there were nevertheless expectations of the 'right' way to submit requests or to declare even temporary devotion. For a literary stylist such as Azmizade this also offered an opportunity to display his compositional skills, and raises his letters to Nasuh Paşa to the level of gifts, carefully crafted to reflect the power of the state of which Nasuh Paşa was but the current symbol. In this sense, letters to a grand vezir were neither empty, obsequious rhetoric nor potentially humiliating begging letters. They were material to be copied, kept, and included without any hesitation in a *münşe'at* collection.

²⁴ Herman, 'The language of fidelity', pp. 12-13.